



September, 2018 *In The Know* Summary

## **CONVERSATIONS WORTH HAVING**

**Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive & Meaningful Engagement**

by Cheri Torres & Jackie Stavros

### **What Did We Discuss?**

Cheri Torres and Jackie Stavros co-facilitated a discussion of their recently published book, [Conversations Worth Having](#). ‘Conversations worth having’ are affirmative, appreciative-based conversations that add value, as opposed to ‘critical’ or ‘destructive’ conversations that are statement-based (and devalue).

### **Defining AI**

- The authors provided two definitions of Appreciative Inquiry (AI):
  - Definition of AI for an OD audience: “AI is the collaborative discovery of giving life to a system. Looking at the best of what was, what is, what could be.”
  - Definition of AI for a general audience: “AI looks for the best for yourself and others in the relevant world around you.”
- AI is not just about “being happy.” “Appreciative” (= adds value) is not just what has been of value, but what is of value, and what will add value. It is about engaging in conversations and activities with one another that add value. For example, if a problem needs to be addressed, it adds value to bring it up.
- Get curious. The inquiry in ‘AI’ is about wondering and searching for what gives life.
  - David Cooperrider refers to “Curiosity Velocity” which means leaning into what you are curious about. Consider: What do you want more of? What could happen? What are your wishes?

### **Two Main Approaches**

- **Reframing** – Look for a positive frame to flip a problem. If you identify a problem in an organization, consider where the issue is NOT a problem, look at what is being done differently there—and figure out how to replicate it. Look at any behaviors or practices that add value to people and organizations.
  - E.g., A university is not using an expensive learning management system. Reframe: Are there departments in the university that do use the system? What is working well in those departments (what can we learn from their implementation)?
- **Asking generative questions** – These are questions, asked with curiosity, that expand what’s working. Once you identify what works, inquire about it to support growth.

### **Success Story 1: Manufacturing Plant in Michigan**

- One of the book’s authors was engaged to help a manufacturing plant build its shut-down plan after the plant’s holding company made the decision to close the plant in three year’s time. The layoffs were to be planned out in phases, with all employees losing their job by the time the plant closed.

- In a strategy session, the OD practitioner suggested the group write a one-year plan to keep their jobs and start job cuts in Year 2. For Year 1, the participants came up with a “revitalization list” and brought the plan back to the holding company.
- The result? The plant is still open today (10 years later)!

### Success Story 2: Hospital in Michigan

- A hospital experiencing a growth in demand started to see patient satisfaction ratings decline. The VP of Quality inquired about the satisfaction ratings and was met with a defensive response, “We are doing the best we can.” “We are short staffed.”
- Exposed to AI principles, she began to shift to a “connecting” mindset. (“Of course they care as much as I do.” “Everyone wants patients to be satisfied.”)
- She got curious. She shifted her frame to, “We want patients who are well served and satisfied with service. How do we get there?” She asked the nursing staff to observe what was working with the patients who were satisfied. In one week’s time the nurses were eagerly sharing success stories and best practices. After one quarter, the overall satisfaction ratings had improved.

#### Sample Questions for Feedback

- What do you want more of?
- What are three wishes you have for the health and vitality of this team or this organization?
- What is possible?

### Related Resources

- Related [Blog post by Laura Mendelow](#)
- Visit the *Conversations Worth Having* website [Conversationsworthhaving.today](http://Conversationsworthhaving.today) to download an Executive Summary of the book
- AI Commons <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/>

\*The Chesapeake Bay Organizational Development Network (CBODN) Book Club is a monthly session, open to all learners. Each month, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, or coaching. There’s no obligation to pre-read the book. The session summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For a listing of Book Club summaries, [click here](#).